

The School of Instruction which went to the West Indies in the middle of February have got off to a very good start.

It is with regret that we have had to say goodbye to our 35mm. technicians. With the closing down of that side of our activities we have lost the services of those who have been responsible for so much of our progress, and we wish Messrs. Gover, Morey, Lagden and Tredaway good luck and good hunting.

Last but not least we say affectionate farewell to the Central Office of Information, who bore with us in a fatherly manner, saw us through our teething troubles, and on many occasions spared the rod. We are very fortunate in that the C.O.I. have agreed to extend to us the services of their Production Services Division, to whose efficient and sympathetic advice and work this magazine owes its existence.

## One Step Ahead

**W**HAT a lot has been written about the illiterate African and films. How little solid sense, how many debatable theories, and how much high-falutin nonsense! I am not going to add yet another voice to the argument. Whether or not the illiterate African sees things differently, or has different laws of mental progression, I leave to the experts to say. So far only little research has yet been undertaken into the impact of films on illiterate African audiences. The results are unsatisfactory because they are fragmentary and unscientific, and offer no conclusive evidence. Such data as are available appear to be the personal opinions of self-appointed experts. I am going to suggest that to achieve some results with film-making in Africa we have got to abandon the current stereotyped methods and adopt new techniques and a new approach.

The reorganisation of the Film Section of the Public Relations Department, Gold Coast, early in 1949, from a 16mm. production unit into the Gold Coast Film Unit, working on a 35mm. professional basis, was an official appreciation of this need. Hitherto films made in Africa, either by local amateurs or a visiting Colonial Film Unit, with very few exceptions, have been content to stress the "mock heroic". The theme of these films was simple, it is true, but the story was always the same. The assumption was that the uneducated African does not understand films, and for that reason films must be made on a definite pattern and should follow certain rules. These rules were subsequently sanctified and given the name of "Specialised Technique". All films so made followed a common style: there was no scope for the free play of the imagination. Anything more intricate than a rudimentary and simple plot was avoided; the seamy side of life was never shown, and the moral was always painfully obvious. The goody-goody type



*The Old*

who did everything right always won (without effort), and the foolish man who had done everything wrong was duly penitent and saw the error of his ways.

That films can have a powerful and at times overwhelming impact on their audience is no longer open to question. But to be so effective they must speak not only through the local idiom and traditions, but also reflect the social and cultural aspirations of their audience. Patronising commentaries which do not credit the illiterate African with at least some degree of intelligence or shrewd discernment are not likely to leave any mark.

But how can we hold the interest of our illiterate African audiences? How can we best use this weapon in our attack against disease, ignorance, superstition and illiteracy?

It is just here that the Gold Coast Film Unit seems to be pointing the way.

Last year we made a film in Togoland about malnutrition. We wanted to show why so many babies die after they are weaned, and what to do if babies are to live. Here was a simple story which has happened a million times in Africa. We decided to tell the story in the local idiom of the people and to use the story-telling technique.



*The New*

Traditional story-telling was once, and in places still is, a high and popular art. By casting films in the traditional pattern of story-telling we hope to speak in a manner which is familiar to indigenous African culture, and is traditionally a form of instruction and entertainment. We believe this technique provides a solid basis for the old educational maxim "Move from the known to the unknown".

In all our films, from purely educational and instructional films on hygiene and health, agriculture and forestry to story documentaries, we want to apply as far as possible the local idiom of the story-teller. We are determined not to make our films dull. We want to say all the things that need to be said on a given subject as effectively as we can, and in the light of such social and human data as are available. To this end we hope to enlist the help of African composers, musicians, sculptors, painters and teachers—in fact anyone who is curious to experiment with this new and exciting technique—and use it for education to responsible citizenship. We want to appeal to the emotions of our audiences, rather than their reason, for what is art if it fails to appeal to the feelings?

How far the Unit has been successful, and what is likely to be its main role in the future, it is as yet too early to say. So far we have



been in production for twelve months and have produced two major films (Nutrition—*Amenu's Child* and *New Horizons*—Education in the Gold Coast) and three issues of a cine-magazine called Gold Coast Review (a bi-monthly newsreel recording progress made in the country). None of our films has yet been shown and their appeal to illiterate audiences remains to be seen.

We may have had some mistakes and are likely to make some more. But we are learning as we go along. We know that the last word in films for African audiences has not been said and we will continue to try out our ideas, believing that in films, as in any other pursuit concerned with the teaching of the people, it is better to lead one step ahead than to trail behind.

G. B. Odunton

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*The following comments on the article entitled "One Step Ahead" have been received. Further articles or letters on the subject should be addressed to the Editor, Colonial Cinema, 21 Soho Square, London, W.1.*

### RE . . . ONE STEP AHEAD

Mr. Odunton is obviously an enthusiast regarding the potentialities of the moving picture medium. He is contemptuous about theoretical arguments, and states he will not add to them, but immediately proceeds to do so. Strangely enough the theory he later propounds is a very old one.

Though he is apparently a believer in "scientific research"—that is to say, the method that abhors generalisations of a loose nature—he weakens his argument immediately by the sweeping statement that the *only available* data are the *personal* opinions of self-appointed experts. Has he scientifically checked his information?

He then joins the ranks of the "self-appointed" experts by stating dogmatically a completely vague solution for "some results" . . . this solution being the abandonment of present methods and the adoption of a *new* technique and a *new* approach.

Later he describes, but avoids defining, these components for success as the "story-telling technique", and the new approach of "the local idiom" . . . a term that may mean many things.

Had he listened to the "self-appointed experts", or read some of their writings, he would have discovered that for years they have advocated with constant reiteration the value of the story-thread in film-making . . . the human tale to carry the lesson . . . and have applied it in numerous films. This is no discovery of Mr. Odunton's.

Also he would have discovered that they repudiate the charge that their methods are some strange mumbo-jumbo that resulted in the

removal from "all" their films of anything that permitted free play to the imagination . . . yet Odunton charges them with *sanctifying* this absurd restriction!

On the contrary they followed faithfully the educational law of all mental progress common to *all* peoples, the advance from the known to the unknown, and this is impossible if all imagination is stifled, and only possible if imagination is skilfully aroused.

His contemptuous dismissal of the "goody-goody" type of film story in which the wise man always wins *without effort* is evidence of his whole *ex parte* attitude to wild and unsupported charges.

In conclusion, what is the precise nature of the "step ahead" to which he refers . . . surely not story-telling, for that is not new. Is it possible that Mr. Odunton himself is one step behind?

G. P.

### ODUNTON'S ARTICLE

My general reaction to the article is sorrow at the language employed, and the lack of facts to back up the statements, but at the same time I think there is valid criticism.

It is quite apparent that there is a vital need for some real research, if only to stop misinformed criticism.

If films have made a powerful and overwhelming impact on their audiences (paragraph 3), as is claimed, I cannot see that the "current stereotyped technique needs abandoning". My own desire is for a bit more data to prove that we have made such an impact upon our audiences. For example, when it can be shown that because of a film farmers are made less reluctant to cut down trees diseased by swollen shoot, or better yields result from better planting of cotton, as shown by a film, then I shall be prepared to listen to new theories on how to increase this effect, but until that time I want some better proof about the old theories, for in my view they stand "Not proven".

We are all conscious of the rut into which our films have got themselves, but how to get out of it and yet remain a teacher is one of the problems.

Odunton has quite forgotten that *Fight T.B.* and *Good Business*, whatever their defects, were set to a story pattern. There would be more justice if we were accused of introducing characters merely as pegs upon which to hang our teaching, and by so doing turning them into characterless stooges. How to avoid this without producing story entertainment films, with its emphasis on emotional reaction, and the consequent limit on direct teaching, which I take to be one of our main purposes, is a nut yet to be cracked.

I am still of the opinion that if production is not tied to exhibition, and the whole planned to assist and be *part* of departmental propaganda,

we shall get less and less film used for teaching, and more and more for vague background.

It may well be that a film on cocoa, or coffee, with an implicit but unuttered message, as in *The Blue Lamp*, is the best pattern. This kind of film costs money and the road inevitably leads to the full synchronised talkie, just as static cinemas lead to entertainment.

I have still not tried out an idea I discussed with Sellers in Nigeria, the making of a story film with emphasis on character and story value, supported by films dealing with the techniques shown in the film. For example one might make a film showing the difficulties which beset a father who wished to send his son to school, his endeavour to earn more money by trying out more efficient farming. His difficulties in learning and the triumphant overcoming of them until his object was achieved. The details of his toil would hardly be noted, these would be the background of feeling. The film, of feature length, might well be shown one night, and followed up two or three days later by a "Baraza" at which the techniques of cultivation in the film were demonstrated, by film, in detail for the purposes of instruction. The first film would prepare the mind, the second would instruct it.

The trouble with film-making is that it is surrounded by an insistent and bemusing glamour. Almost everyone engaged in the more humble, but none the less important, tasks of making films for instruction is assailed at one time or another by the temptation to try his hand at getting a name for himself, and instead of making a film towards an end, making the film an end in itself. Because of this I am always a little distrustful of any suggestions which may desert the path of education and instruction, straight and unadulterated, for the more pleasant byways of story.

*Norman F. Spurr.*

## The Malayan Film Unit

IN 1945 South-East Asia was served by two Army Film Units, one British and one American. Of the two, the far better equipped was the American, and at the end of hostilities the proposal was made that the Malayan Government should acquire this equipment and set up its own film unit. The equipment available from the American was, on the whole, very good and consisted of a Mitchell camera, a number of Eyemos and a Wall camera, an animation unit and a laboratory processing plant. Various other small items were also available. Later an R.C.A. channel was obtained and recording and dubbing facilities established.

The immediate problem was one of staff, and the selection and recruitment of local talent presented a major task. By a process of elimination and selection the nucleus was formed.